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ABSTRACT

In 1866, Alexander Bain proposed that by evaluating unity, coherence, and emphasis (which he brought together under the acronym "CUE"), students could judge the effectiveness of their written paragraphs. One hundred twenty-five years later, the proposition is still central to composition instruction. A review of modern writing textbooks reveals that unity is the most entrenched of the CUE concepts, followed by coherence and emphasis respectively. Some books even try to unite the CUE principles with non-traditional methods of writing. Implicit, if not explicit, concern for CUE is found in every writing textbook. The bottom line of writing instruction seems to be recognizing and fostering two sharply different forms of discourse: unity, coherence, and emphasis on the one hand, and appreciation for creative disunity, incoherence, and a complete lack of emphasis on the other. Alternatives are available to instructors: they can encourage more creative writing in freshman composition courses; they can assign creative take-home tests in place of expository in-class exams; and they can point out differences between the two types of discourse. In any case, the processes of arriving at the unified, coherent, and emphasized written product is infinitely more important than whether the time-honored CUE formula was used in achieving the result. (Thirty-seven references are attached.) (SG)

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"Alexander Bain's CUE in the Post-Modern World:
Unity Revisited"

A presentation given by Phylis Dryden
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at the CCCC Convention, Boston, MA
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Dateline: 1866 - A piece of trivia: Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pennsylvania is founded.

Wider-reaching news: In Scotland, a man named Alexander Bain publishes a textbook called English Composition and Rhetoric, which proposes an idea later known as the acronym CUE. Bain says that by evaluating unity, coherence and emphasis in their written work, students can judge the effectiveness of their paragraphs. The textbook will become popular in American colleges and universities.

Erika Lindemann summarizes Bain's laws for paragraphing, which include: unified individual sentences, each connecting with the following; an opening sentence which will "indicate the scope of the paragraph"; a unified paragraph with "a sustained purpose" and no digressions; proximity of related topics; and a clear indication of the relative importance of principal and subordinate statements--in other words, a show of unity, demonstrable coherence, and clear emphasis. Lindemann notes that several of Bain's principles may also be applied to whole works, not solely to paragraphs (142).

Dateline: 1962 - nearly 100 years later. The New Criticism is firmly entrenched in American colleges as a way of studying literature. Janet Emig has not yet written her ground-breaking work, The Composing Processes of Twelfth-Graders. Other important works by James Moffett and James Britton have not yet been published.

A scared 17-year-old from Vermont begins her freshman year at a Massachusetts college. Her textbook for Freshman Comp.--Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's shorter edition of Modern Rhetoric.

The student turns to Chapter 3 and learns how to organize a composition. She finds that there is a "threefold set of terms that is . . . fundamental to any process of composition. They are" (not surprisingly) "unity, coherence, and emphasis. Any sound piece of writing will exemplify these three principles" (17).

Under "Unity," the student learns that some "fundamental interest . . . must permeate the whole composition. The composition must be one thing--not a hodge-podge" (17). "Unity is not an arbitrary thing," she reads, "a limitation imposed from the outside. It is simply an indication that the writer's mind can work systematically and can, therefore, arrive at a meaning" (17). A unified work proves that the writer is not "scatterbrained" (17).

The student reads on to find that there is something called a unified subject, but there is also "the larger unity of good writing" (19). Bringing in material that doesn't bear directly on the subject is a no-no. A large section of the CUE chapter is devoted to coherence, painstakingly defined as having "elements of the discourse [that] stick together" (20). One part must lead to the next, linkages must be developed, and no items may be pointlessly introduced. There is, in fact, a "common-sense principle that one thing should lead to another" (20). Coherence will work at the level of overall organization and in terms of local transitions (24).

The final item the student writer learns about is emphasis. Emphasis, according to Brooks and Warren, makes clear to the reader "the intended scale of importance of [the various] elements in the discourse" (25). As a "principle of organization," emphasis foregrounds some items and places others in the background (25). A juicy tidbit for the student is learning that the most emphatic position in a paragraph or composition is at the end, "for the last impression on a reader is what counts most" (26).

With all this helpful information in mind, the student learns something about writing. She becomes a published non-fiction writer and journalist, and eventually a poet, fiction-writer and English professor. No harm done. (Please note that the latter sentence is a fragment.)

Dateline: 1991 - 125 years have passed since Alexander Bain first published his influential textbook. Lebanon Valley College is celebrating its 125th anniversary. A 47-year-old man is starting college there for the first time, having missed out on the opportunity in 1962, when his high school classmates enrolled. He doesn't know it, but a lot of things have changed in the teaching of Freshman Composition, which he decides will be his first course. One thing hasn't changed much, though. He browses through his textbook, the 2nd edition of the St. Martin's Guide to Writing by Rise Axelrod and Charles Cooper, and reads the following on p. 406: "If any rule for paragraphing is truly universal, it is this: paragraphs should be focused, unified and coherent." (Notice that "emphasis" has been replaced by "focus," but unity and coherence remain part of the same hallowed trinity. Also please note that Focus, Unity and Coherence would make a very poor acronym.)

Dateline: 1991 - Next door to the Freshman Composition class at Lebanon Valley College, someone is teaching a litera-

> ture class. Post-modern texts drive some students crazy, others deliciously mad. The fragment is privileged, interruption is the norm, the marginal is celebrated, meanings are wonderfully indeterminate, creative chaos reigns as the order of the day, and language stands on end. Students clutching Freshman Composition papers which have just been fragged and awk'd in their word-processed margins may defiantly ask one of two kinds of basic questions: Of the literary texts, they may say, "What does it mean? I can't understand it. I haven't a clue. It's a piece of trash. I like something I can understand." Of the Freshman Composition texts, rebellious students may say, "Why can't I write like the people I read in Lit. class? They break rules all the time and my Lit. teacher calls it art. She says it's a 'language experience.' If I wrote like that for Freshman Comp., I'd get an F."

What's at the heart of all this seemingly paradoxical information? More importantly, what are the answers our writing textbooks are providing? To address this issue I will do three things: analyze some representative textbooks on the subject of unity, coherence and emphasis; take a look at some of the non-traditional or less conventional textbooks to assess their goals and practices; and come to a brief conclusion which will consist of a few observations, personal recommendations and some open-ended questions about this subject.

To preface my evaluation of modern writing textbooks, I'll note that when Brooks and Warren's Modern Rhetoric was updated for its 4th edition in 1979, a few things had changed. In the 1979 edition, for instance, options are given beyond the conventional thesis paragraph, but the reader is told, "If you're scatter-brained, you won't recognize unity" (22). "Massiveness of perception" (presumably a sense of wholes) is also linked to unity (170, 180). As in the 1st edition, the text says that unity is not imposed from without. The text no longer suggests that any particular sentence in a paragraph has more emphasis than others, and the writer is warned that while it's OK to use emphasis in paragraphs, this should not be at the expense of the whole composition (222). This pattern of change between the two Brooks and Warren texts, while subtle, was helpful to me in assessing others.

In reviewing modern textbooks, I quickly saw that unity is the most entrenched of concepts, coherence is second, and that emphasis is the word most likely to be called something else or eliminated completely. I also found that the synonyms and explanations for the concepts of coherence and emphasis vary greatly from book to book.

One way I checked for adherence to (or deviation from) the CUE acronym was to take a quick look at the index for words like unity, coherence, or (more rarely) emphasis. Even though some texts don't use these words at all, their practice deviates little from CUE. They may, in fact, have their own buzz words.

Elizabeth Neeld's book, Writing, uses the topic sentence to achieve what other texts blatantly label as unity. She speaks of the "topic sentence paragraph" as providing "the reader with a sense of completeness and satisfaction" (385). Elsewhere in older texts, unity is often linked with wholeness.

Neeld says, "The topic sentence . . . is absolutely necessary for a paragraph to deliver a developed message. More accurately, it is the order and structure of the topic sentence that is absolutely necessary" (389). In textbooks, structure is most often allied to emphasis. As for coherence, Neeld calls this "flow" (415). Where have we heard that word before?

The text states, "In the completing stage you look at your writing to see what you can do to make it move faster, interest the reader more, be better connected, or emphasize what you want remembered" (415). A different vocabulary, but Neeld's advice corresponds to CUE point by point.

Frank O'Hare and Dean Memering's book, The Writer's Work, takes an interesting approach to unity, coherence and emphasis. Unity has a section by itself and is defined as developing "one concept or idea," with no "irrelevant sentences" (445). In order to clarify the "main point," the writer is urged to remove "unrelated ideas" (446).

Coherence, too, is defined and has its own section in the book. It is called "holding together" or "being logically consistent" (447). According to this book, "Coherence is what every writer is finally after" (447). Among the devices proposed for achieving coherence are those normally associated with "emphasis." They include artful repetition and using coordinate and subordinate structures, as well as the watchwords of coherence, i.e., good transitions between ideas (447 - 456).

About 50 pages later, emphasis has a section of its own, including such items as repetition, parallelism and varied sentence structure, among other things (506 - 514). It is interesting to note that the goals of coherence and emphasis are often achieved through similar means and that, as with many of the contemporary textbooks, any mention of unity, coherence or emphasis occurs more than 400 pages into the book.

Randall Decker and Robert Schwegler's Patterns of Exposition 12 talks about unity in a glossary at the end of the book, cross-referencing the reader to the words coherence and emphasis. The text says, "unity is basic to all other virtues of good writing, even to coherence and emphasis, the other two organic essentials" (473). The glossary definition of "thesis" also directs the reader/writer to unity, and the topic sentence is mentioned as important to a unified effect (472).

In Steps to Writing Well by Jean Wyrick, the word "emphasis" has been superseded by "development." I quote: "every paragraph should have adequate development, unity and coherence" (44). I further quote: "Every sentence in a body paragraph should directly relate to the main idea presented by the topic sentence. A paragraph must stick

to its announced subject. . . . In other words, a good paragraph has unity" (58).

Sylvan Barnet and Marcia Stubbs' Practical Guide to Writing handles the situation a bit differently. There is a section entitled, "Unifying Ideas into Paragraphs" (111), then one called "Organization in Paragraphs," which says, "A paragraph needs more than a unified point; it needs a reasonable organization or sequence" (113). There is an additional warning that "It is the writer's job, not the reader's, to give the paragraph its unity and organization" (117). After that, another section called "Coherence in Paragraphs" begins by saying that "In addition to having a unified point and a reasonable organization, a good paragraph is coherent. . . ." (118). In this instance, "organization" seems to have taken the place of emphasis.

Crafting Prose by Don Cox and Elizabeth Giddens asks the student writer to test for a "reasonable focus," a "workable thesis" and then to "think" about organization (32 - 35). "A useful distinction to make when you organize your writing," this textbook says, "is the difference between formula and function" (35). The student writer is given a rule of thumb for organizing in the adage, "forms follow function" (35). After drafting, the writer is invited to "fit [the] material to conventional ordering patterns" (38). In this case, organization seems to match coherence, "focus" equates to emphasis, and thesis equals unity.

Lee Jacobus' book Writing as Thinking speaks of unity, but turns coherence into "cohesion" (416). On another page, the goal of achieving "clarity and unity" is mentioned through "development," which seems to have replaced emphasis (417). Here clarity seems synonymous with coherence, and stems from cohesion, which is defined as relating each sentence to surrounding material (416).

Strategies for Successful Writing by James Reinking and Andrew Hart describes the characteristics of effective paragraphs in terms of unity (having "one, and only one, key controlling idea"), coherence (establishing "links between parts"), and both organization and adequate development of ideas (188 - 198). Organizing and developing ideas appear to be synonyms of each other and have replaced emphasis in this text.

Laurie Kirszner and Stephen Mandell's Writing has a section for both unity and coherence. Emphasis is subsumed under the heading of "Coherence," which combines such items as repetition ("Carefully used, repetition emphasizes important ideas in your paragraph" [198]), transitional words and phrases, and pronoun references, but doesn't mention such structures as parallelism or subordination as such. A sub-section of "Unity" is "patterns of development," which include division and classification, etc. According to this book, the organizational pattern can give "focus and unity" to the paragraph (192). Note that in other works focus is often substituted for emphasis.

Models in Process, a rhetoric and reader by William J. Kelly, speaks of stages of composing. The goal is to move from "unfocused ideas to [a] thesis" (21). Sentences and paragraphs are seen as building blocks to support the thesis. Topic sentences are important,

and the thesis must be somewhere within the introduction, which may be more than one paragraph long. Coherence and unity are replaced by terms such as "tracing the common thread" (23). The concept of emphasis is handled by advising the writer to "use the information that best supports [the] main ideas" (25).

Moving in the direction of less conventional textbooks, I analyzed The Riverside Guide to Writing by Douglas Hunt. Under a section called "Form and Style," this text describes "firm and flexible" approaches to organizing prose (476). Terms like "topic sentence" and "thesis statement" are introduced as having been used for "generations" of other students (477). The words unity, coherence and emphasis do not appear, but the writing goals match time-honored formulas. These formulas (with my parenthetical comparisons) are found on pp. 476 to 478 of the text and include: helping readers understand the relationships between parts of an essay (coherence), having a thesis which controls the whole essay (unity), using sentence after sentence to reinforce the entire essay (emphasis).

A sub-section called "The Flexible Approach" goes on to discuss different ways of writing which are less formulaic, e.g. not having to place topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs (479). The firm and flexible approaches are shown on a continuum (480).

A later section talks about "assisting the reader" through "connection, imagery, and simplicity" (501). The "Connection" section (called "Building Bridges") resembles both coherence and emphasis in its encouragement of repetition and effective sentence patterns (502 - 503).

Peter Elbow's Writing without Teachers, while not necessarily used as a writing textbook today, has been heavily influential to the development of modern teaching practices. The book clearly has unity as its goal.

Elbow speaks of the growing process of writing as having four stages: starting to write and then keeping on; going through a period of disorientation and chaos; finding an emerging center of gravity; then mopping up or editing (25).

For Elbow, the turning point in the growth process is finding a focus, a center of gravity in the chaos (35). When referring to his center of gravity concept, Elbow uses the word "unity" parenthetically. He speaks of getting the work "unified," putting it "into an organized structure" (38).

He does not speak of coherence as such, but his text encourages students to sort out their ideas and to sense the relationships between assertions (62 - 63).

In Elbow's book Writing with Power, he seems to be moving in more conventional directions, saying, for instance, that the goal of free writing is not absolutely limpid fluency, which lacks vitality (19). His free writing exercises seem more focused than in his first book. They specifically require the writer to look for hot spots or centers of gravity (e.g. 45).

With his gimmicks such as collage writing or his cut-and-paste method, which start with fragments arranged without connections, Elbow encourages student to move in the direction of coherence through rearrangement (129, 147 - 148). He says to "do what little writing is necessary to connect [the fragments] and make a complete and coherent whole" (148). Unity and coherence are clearly important to this text.

Donald Murray's book, Write to Learn, is another interesting counterpoint to traditional textbooks. Focus is an important word for Murray; it seems to have absorbed both the concepts of unity and emphasis. A chapter about focus states, "The professional says one thing in the piece of writing. A single meaning dominates [it]" (92). Murray further says, "Make sure there is a dominant message to the reader and that everything in the piece of writing . . . supports and advances that message" (92).

The text cautions the student writer that readers don't like to be confused (125). This seems to be related to the writing goal of coherence. Murray also suggests finding a focus before developing a structure or order (125). The chapter titles are similar to what is seen in many other books: "Order," "Develop," "Clarify" (xiv - xv).

Some of Murray's checklists of advice and questions resemble the old formulas for unity, coherence and emphasis:

> "State the single, most important message you have for the reader in one sentence" (212).
>
> "Is the structure logical? Does each point lead to the next in a sensible sequence?" (213).
>
> "Does the structure within the text support and advance the principal message?" (213).

Some of the more unusual books that are available have their own agendas, which often closely match the old formula of CUE. Gabriele Rico's book on clustering, called Writing the Natural Way, postulates the drive toward "wholeness" as an innate human impulse to shape personally meaningful and coherent wholes (9). Her method is to have students put a word or word pair in a center, or nucleus, and then cluster outward. She claims this creates writing with coherence, unity and wholeness by tapping into the right brain through a non-linear process of free association (11).

David Bartholomy's book Sometimes You Just Have to Stand Naked is an interesting attempt to set up a dialectic between traditional and non-traditional ways of writing. In many ways the book itself is dis-jointed, using phrases such as "to be continued." The persona has a rambling dialogue with Ed, his alter ego, who believes in correctness, is somewhat stuffy and who serves as a "writing conscience . . . formed by conventional, unimaginative teachers" (4 - 5). Through Ed, alternative assignments are given, which tend to be traditional and conservative, such as definition through examples.

In order for it to be effective, all writing must have some form, according to this book (63, 172). "Form" seems to represent

structure and also to be synonymous with organization, order and arrangement (63). The writer may use lots of details but must also be selective (72 - 73). The ancient Aristolean concept of selection and emphasis is at work here.

Bartholomy's book talks about various ways to unify writing. He implies that form will find itself (76), and he states that writing should be interesting as a whole and in parts (82). If writers plan carefully, the book says they'll avoid "straying" (148). Selection of details and the communication of general rather than specific truth both provide a "unifying force" for writing (163). Note that selection ("determining what will be left out and what will be included" [163])" is traditionally linked with emphasis. It is therefore clear that whatever the jargon, even in this unconventional book, unity and emphasis are seen as basic ingredients to successful writing, and coherence is implied because the prose is supposed to be reader-based or audience-conscious.

Even Linda Flower's Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing has conventional elements to it. Although Flower comes up with her own acronym, WIRMI (What I Really Mean Is), she also tacitly subscribes to the philosophy of CUE. Her issue trees or diagrams signal student writers to "stop to look for relationships and create new unifying ideas" (123). This amounts to unity and coherence. In her book, the words "focus" and "thesis" are important to discussions of the writing process. Chapter 12 invites the writer to edit for "connections and coherence" (239). Indirectly, then, Flower has endorsed CUE as a standard.

Based on this analysis, one finds an implicit, if not always explicit, concern for CUE in every textbook. Only the vocabulary and the methods of achievement vary. Ann Berthoff's Forming/Writing/Thinking says that perception is a process which involves differentiation and selection, amalgamation and elimination (39); that one must write coherently, makes parts into wholes (47) and search out chaos, not for its own sake, but to "discover ways of emerging" and finding form (65). Chaos must be shaped into form, and that form must have unity. Berthoff specifically mentions unity, coherence and emphasis as criteria for evaluating writing (175). She advises testing for unity by glossing a paragraph, but warns against ending up with unity without coherence, or having unity and coherence but no emphasis (175). This comes from a woman who invites writers to "interpret their interpretations," to "think about thinking"--from a person who says that "invention needs chaos" (165).

It's not difficult to endorse the concept that Elbow and Berthoff espouse--writers begin with chaos (sometimes self-generated) and work toward (or fall into) form. After all, it is a generally orderly world out there, a world of term papers and resumés and business letters, essay exams, cover letters, recipe books, product warranties, etc. We need unity and coherence (and perhaps emphasis thrown in as an extra), don't we? But what about creativity? What about the previously mentioned chasm between Freshman Composition writing and post-modern literature? Is this a problem, and if so, how serious is it?

Perhaps the best thing is to decide, like James Kinneavy, that literary discourse is something special, derived at least partially as a deviation from some norm (360). If we endorse the view that literary writing is somehow paranormal, we are then free to teach discourse on two levels, which is what we're doing, anyway. We hardly expect the average student to write a little story (or even a dazzling fragment) when taking a one-hour essay test for a literature class. We are, however, free to coax students into privileging the fragmentary, the marginal, the marvellously post-modern, even as we may still expect them to use a wholly different form of discourse when fulfilling their more mundane academic and societal obligations. That seems, in effect, the bottom line--recognizing and actually fostering two sharply different forms of discourse: unity, coherence and emphasis on the one hand, and appreciation for creative disunity, incoherence and a complete lack of emphasis on the other.

There are, blessedly, some alternatives, but they take courage and they take special kinds of students. Instructors may encourage (or at the very least allow) more creative writing in Freshman Composition courses. They may devise creative take-home tests (such as "Make Your Own Movie," whereby students demonstrate their understanding of literary concepts by creating skeletal creative works) to substitute for those grueling one- or two-hour expository essay exams, as uninspiring to correct as they are to take. Most of all, instructors may specifically point out the differences between the two types of discourse and sanction an amplified code-switching by honestly saying, "You must write this way to succeed in my business communications class, but I really value those fragmentary scribblings you showed me in your journal--I think you're on to something."

Unity, coherence and emphasis didn't begin with Bain; it doesn't take much effort to track these concepts back to Plato and Aristotle--perhaps they go back even further than that. One view is that if these principles have worked for 2000 years, why not keep them (by whatever name they're called)? Why split hairs over semantics?

An opposing view is furnished by Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, who advise against mixing old and new rhetorical concepts, which they view as a smorgasbord approach that's self-contradictory on an intellectual level (16). In fact, while many textbooks have changed their vocabulary, they are still using which are considered by some to be old-fashioned processes, such as teaching discourse by modes.

Personally, even though I love post-modern literature and chaotic forms, I see great value in traditional discourse, too. A well-done magazine article, a finely-crafted business letter, an exceptional essay test--these are all worthwhile. If CUE has survived this long as a way of testing the effectiveness of such prose, I see no harm in calling it what it is, even in modern textbooks. While I like the variations I've seen, I must stress that the principles of CUE are far more important than their names, and the process of arriving at the unified, coherent and well-focused (or emphasized) written product is infinitely more valuable than whether or not one uses a time-honored formula to get there. The rubric is less important than the result; when we select textbooks, we should decide on the route we want our students to take. The destination seems the same for all.

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